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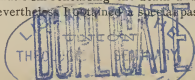
REPORT OF A MISSION TOUR DOWN THE EUPHRATES FROM HILLAH TO BUSRAH.

BY THE REV. S. M. ZWEMER.

On the 21st of July I left Busrah in the S. S. "Megedieh" for Bagdad for the purpose of crossing over to Hillah if possible, and returning down the Euphrates. The object of this tour was twofold: to study the country and villages along the less known river as regards present condition, and as future centers for Gospel work, and also to ascertain the practicability of this route in the heat of summer and during Moharram season.

The river Tigris from Busrah to Bagdad has been often described by travellers and passed by colporteurs, as it is the regular route for Turkish and English steamers. The principal towns from Busrah up the river are *Kurna Amara* and *Kut el amara*, besides many small villages and Arab encampments. The three larger towns offer a promising field for colporteur and Gospel work, and should be visited at least twice a year. The journey from Busrah to Bagdad was without special incident. I was enabled to dispose of a few portions of Scripture to some Moslems, and had ample opportunity to speak with many of them.

We arrived at Bagdad on July 25th, and I remained at the C. M. S. Mission with Dr. Mrs. H. M. Sutton until the 27th, making preparations for the overland journey. I was cautioned by the British Consulate and friends at Bagdad against attempting the overland journey until after Moharran, as at this season the Shiah population everywhere, and especially in the vicinity of the sacred shrines of Kerbela and Nejef, are in the fervor of fanaticism rehearsing the death and martyrdom of Ali and Hussain. Nevertheless, I obtained a Surah passport



through the kindness of Col. Mockler, the British Resident, with the privilege of engaging a Zaptieh escort in case of necessity. Although there are many and real difficulties to travel in Arabia, nothing is so frequently exaggerated by the fearful friends or the wily enemies of missions as the fanaticism of the Arabs. I found no trouble from that quarter.

At Bagdad I met Jakoob, our native assistant, who is at present under police surveillance and cannot leave the city because he is a Christian. Though closely watched he has not been idle; for some time he has had a couple of Moslem inquirers come to him and instructed them in the Word of God. One of them I took with me from Bagdad as a companion and servant on the road. We hired two mules and left the city of the old Caliphs with a caravan for Kerbela, at 4 P.M., July 27th, and made our first halt that night four hours from Bagdad, sleeping on a blanket under the stars. An hour after midnight the pack-saddles were lifted in place and we were off. It was a mixed company; Arabs, Persians, and Turks; merchants for Hillah and pilgrims to the sacred shrines; women in those curtained, cage-like structures called *taht-i-vans*,—two portable zenanas hanging from each beast; dervishes on foot with green turbans, heavy canes and awful visages: and to complete the picture a number of rude coffins strapped cross-wise on pack-mules and holding the remains of some true believers, long since ready for the holy ground at Nejf.

The caravan travelled along the desert road mostly at night to escape the fearful heat of mid-day by shelter in the public Khan. Nothing could be more uninteresting than the country between Bagdad and Babylon at this season of the year. The maps mark six Khans on the route, but three of these are in ruins and the others are stages of a caravan rather than villages or centres of cultivation. The soil appears excellent, but there are no irrigation canals, and everything has a deserted appearance. A few low shrubs between the mounds and moles of an ancient civilization; mud-houses near the Khans and some Arab encampments; camel skeletons shining white by the wayside, under a burning sun; and a troop or two of gazelle making for the river-banks—that is all you see until you reach the palm-banked Euphrates at Hillah.

On noon of the day after leaving Bagdad we rested at Khan Mahmoudieh. These khans consist of a large enclosure with heavy walls of sun-dried or Babylonian brick. In the interior are numerous alcoves or niches, ten by six feet and four feet above ground; you seek out an empty niche and find a resting-place until the caravan starts at midnight. In the centre of the enclosure is a well and a large platform for prayer, utilized, as in our case, by late arrivals who find no niche reserved, for sleeping and cooking. The rest of the court is for animals and baggage. Usual Arab supplies were obtainable at these resting-

These estimates are the only ones I have seen in regard to the population of the Euphrates Districts. What the total population would amount to on the basis of the estimate for male adults, is a second question with many factors. Moslems here do not count females even in a census of their own family, and the death-rate of infants is high. The government of the three districts is as indicated on the table; except that I could not learn whether the Sheikh of the Montefik Arabs still has any subordinate or real ruling power.

I remained at Hillah two days and a half, and had opportunity to see the town and its people. Except for the annual visits of colporteurs from the British and Foreign Bible Society in recent years, no mission work has ever been done here. Socially and morally the town is fearfully corrupt. On the road to the sacred shrines, Hillah has always a large shifting population of pilgrims from India and Persia; add to this the notorious corruption of the Turkish army and the Shiah devil-doctrine of Meta'h or contract marriages, and the immorality of the place is easily explained.

While at Hillah I visited three of the *kahwaks*—the cafe of Arabia and read from the Bible, speaking to those who gathered around. Many Moslems and Jews also came to the Khan and with one of the latter I attended the Jewish Synagogue service. It was mostly in Arabic, lengthy and spiritless comments on a Targum text by Rabbi Ishak.

Before leaving Hillah, and not at all to my surprise, I was summoned to the Serai for selling books and preaching the Gospel. I expected a rather rough time, but when they saw my passport and heard my explanation, they received me very civilly. On leaving the courthouse I presented one of the authorities and the scribe of the assembly, a Jew, with copies of the Arabic New Testament and the Epistle to the Hebrews in Hebrew.

On July 31st we left Hillah and sailed down the river in a native boat similar to the "bellum" of Busrah, but without awning. The Euphrates is more muddy than the Tigris, and its course, though less sinuous, is broken here and there by shallow rapids. The following are the villages and encampments between *Hillah* and *Diwaniyeh*: El Ataj, Doulab, Dobleh, Kwaha, Saadeh, Tenhara, Bir Amaneh, Allaj, Anameh, Hosein, Khagaan Sageer and Khagaan Kebir.

We sailed all night and did not stop until we arrived at Diwadiyeh the following afternoon. Many of the villages on the way appeared to have a considerable population; date-groves were plentiful, and we passed two or three Mathhab or tombs of Arab Sheikhs, including that reputed to be of Job, "the greatest of all the sons of the East."

At Diwaniyeh I was directed to the Serai, or government-house, where the Muttaserif Pasha of Hillah was forcing taxes from the unwilling Arabs. I was kindly received, and probably because of my passport

or for safety, was entertained at the Pasha's table, enjoying Turkish civilization and trying to answer many questions on European politics from an American and missionary standpoint. Ignorance of modern history and the map of Europe is not confined to the nomad-Arabs of Irak.

Diwaniyeh has only a small population, and its importance is wealth of palms and the wheat trade down the river; which gives another opportunity for a toll-bridge and Custom House. There was no chance to sell books, although I gave away two copies of Scripture to the Zaptieh guard whom my host thought necessary to send with me down the river. The Arabs are notorious here for their piracy on native craft, and they even attacked the English expedition in 1836. As no steamers are allowed on the Euphrates and the only Turkish gun-boat lies anchored off Markaz, unable to penetrate the narrow morass-channels branching from the river, where forests of reeds hide mat-huts and naked Arabs, it is easier and more correct to say at all times: "The river is unsafe, but we will supply you with a guard." And so I left Diwaniyeh with two soldiers. Saadeb and Salim were as happy as their names. Patching their uniforms, asleep in the bottom of the boat, eating of our bread and dates, or polishing their single-shot rifles, marked "*U. S. Springfield, Snider's Pat. 1863,*" they and we reached Samawa safely. During the day we had passed the following villages: Um-Nejris, Lamlum—also the name of a tribe,—Abu Juwareeb, Rumeitha and Sheweit. Though I believe a safe landing could be made and a stay among the pirate Arabs attempted, yet it would be impossible, except when alone and without soldiers. These river tribes are not true nomads, but live in one place, on fish and the products of the river buffalo. It is a strange sight to see a herd of large, black cattle swimming across stream pursued by shouting, swimming and swearing herdsmen. And this was once the home of Abraham, the friend of God!

The distinction between true Arabs of the nomad tribes and the *Me'dan* was made as early as 1792 by Niebuhr in his travels, and the river boatmen still answer your question with contemptuous accent: "Those are not Arabs, they are *Me'dan*."

Near Rumeitha there was a large menzil of the Lamlum tribe; there may have been a hundred tents. Here we fastened the boat for the night, as our company was afraid to cross certain rapids in the river by starlight. Some of the Arabs came to our boat, armed with flint-locks and the Mikwar, a heavy stick knobbed with sandstone or hard bitumen and in Arab-hands a formidable weapon. But most of the people were asleep, and we could get no supplies of any kind except, finally, two roast fowl from the Turkish garrison in a mud brick fort opposite. Even one of these, by accident, fell to the share of a hungry jackal during the night!

We left early in the morning, and after some difficulty in crossing the shallow rapids, reached Samawa in four hours. Dismissing the zaptiehs, we found a room in the Khan of Haj Nasir on the second floor and overlooking the bazaar, a much better place than at Hillah.

It was the day before Ashera, the great day of Moharran, and the whole town was in funereal excitement. All shops were closed. Shiah were preparing for the great mourning, and Sunni sought a safe place away from the street. As soon as I came the local governor sent word that I must not leave the Khan under any circumstances, nor venture in the street, as he would not be responsible for Shiah violence.

I remained at home, therefore, until the following day, and saw the confusion of the night of Ashera from the window, the tramp of a mob, the beating of breasts, the wailing of women, the bloody banners, and mock-martyr scenes, the rhythmic howling and cries of "Ya Ali! ya Hassan! ya Hussein!" until throats were hoarse and hands hung heavy for a moment, only to go at it again. A pandemonium, as of Baals' prophets on Carmel, before the deaf and dumb god's of Islam,—monotheistic only in its book. "There is no god but God," and yet to the Shiah devotees of Moharran, "He is not in all their thoughts." The martyr caliphs of Nejf are their salvation and their hope, the Houris' lap.

The following day I went about the town freely, and spoke and sold books to those who came to the Khan. Samawa is smaller than Hillah; four-fifths of the population, I was told, are Shiah, and there are forty Jews, but no Christians. A bridge of boats crosses the river and leads from the Serai to the Sunni coffee-houses on the eastern bank. West of the town stretches the open desert plain, fourteen camel marches to Hail, the capital of El Nejd.

On August 4th we took passage in a "meheleh," or large river boat loaded with barley for Busrah. There was no place for us except a sort of low cabin under the aft-deck, full of boxes and old clothes, ropes, lanterns and provisions; yet here we found shelter from the sun, and here I taught my Bagdad inquirer and servant his Aleph, Bay, and read John's Gospel to him, until we reached Kurna.

Between Samawa and Narkaz we passed the following Arab villages: Zahara, El Kidr, Derj Kalat, (where there is a Turkish Mudir and a telegraph station on the Hillah-Busrah wire), Luptika, El Ain, Abu Tabr and El Assaniyeh.

The river begins to broaden below Samawah, and its banks are beautiful with palms and willows. Before reaching Markaz we were again delayed at a toll-bridge, but it gave me an opportunity of going on shore and talking with some Arabs.

Markaz, also called Nasiriyeh, is quite a modern town, and better built than any along the river. Its sook is large and wide and the government buildings are imposing for Arabdom. A small gun-boat lies

near the landing opposite the colonel's house, and near the Persian consulate. I first went to the sook of the Sabeans or Disciples of St. John, a remnant of the sect also known as Mandaites, who here number about forty, and to whom I had a letter from one of their number in Busrah. I found they were supplied with Bibles from a previous colporteur visit. The Mudir of the télégraph at Narkaz is a Christian from Mossul, and when we met he took me to his house, where I had dinner with two other native Christians. We had a short Bible-reading, and then I went to the kahwah near the river-bank and sold some Testaments. On the opposite side of the river from Markaz are two large walled enclosures, wheat granneries protected from Arab robbers; three hours west are the ruins of Mugheir—Ur of the Chaldeans.

Our meheleh sailed down the river before daylight and five hours later came to Sook El Shiookh, "the bazaar of old men."

Abd El Fattah, in whose Persian kahwah we found a place, is a cosmopolitan. He had seen Franjees before, had been to Bombay, Aden and Jiddah, knew something of books, a little less of the Gospel, and spoke two English words, of which he was very proud, "Stop her" and "Send a geri."

He was a model inn-keeper, and had it not been for his tea and talk, the three days of stifling heat under a mat-roof would have been less tolerable.

I had a letter here, also, to one of the Sabeans, which undesignedly gave them and me much trouble. The man to whom it was addressed met me, read the letter of introduction, and then carelessly tore it up. Two hours later, all the Sabeans in the place were summoned to the Serai to give an account of their plot with an English man, and produce his letter! I went to their aid, and after long palaver we were dismissed. I was forbidden, however, to sell books until they had been approved by the government. Probably only a pretext to prevent sales, as they were all restored to me when I left. The general uncivility I met with here was so much an exception to the rule, that I can only account for it by the intense heat, which wore on the tempers of Turks and Arabs alike, not to speak of the missionary.

South of Sook El Shiookh the river widens into marshes, where the channel is so shallow that part of the cargo of all river boats is transferred to smaller craft. On account of this day's delay, not on our programme, we were short of provisions before reaching Kurna, and our boatmen were such prejudiced sectarians that it required argument and much back-sheesh to bargain for some rice and the use of their cooking-pot. We were "nejis," "kafir," and what not all; and the captain vowed he would have to wash the whole boat clean at Busrah from the foot-prints of the unbelievers. Between Sook and the junction of the two rivers to form the Shatt El Arab at Kurna, there are many wide,

waste marshes, growing reeds and pasture for the buffalo cattle—a breeding place for insect life and the terror of the boatmen because of the Ma'dan pirates. We were three days on this part of the river, and often all of us were in the water to lift and tug the boat oversome mud-bank.

El Kheit is the only village of any size the whole distance, but the Bedouin of the swamp, who live half the time in the water and have not arrived at even the loin-cloth stage of civilization, are a great multitude.

On August 11th we arrived at Kurna, and as the unfortunate meheleh had to stop one more day at this Custom House, we sought for another chance to reach Busrah during the night. The local governor kindly entrusted us to an Arab who was to see us safely back in a native "mashoof"—a canoe covered with bitumen, light, and well adapted for paddling down stream.

It was an interesting night's journey, and gave time for rehearsing the adventures up the river. The same steamer that took me to Bagdad passed us during the night coming from Busrah; it was just twenty-one days ago.

Seven hundred miles of towing along populous rivers and historic ruins; seven hundred miles of Moslem empire awaiting the conquests of the Cross; one missionary at Bagdad and two at Busrah; what are these among so many? The Euphrates and Tigris are the natural highways for the Gospel in North Arabia, even as the Nile is for that other land of the patriarchs, Egypt. And even so should they be occupied, village after village, by schools and Gospel agencies until from Hillah to the Gulf the doctrine of the Cross is no longer to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Moslems foolishness, but to those that shall believe, both Jews and Moslems, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

BUSRAH, September 21st, 1892.

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